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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 001564

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KIRF](#) [VT](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: INFLUENTIAL KRG MINISTER EYES  
AUTONOMOUS ZONE FOR CHRISTIANS

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Greg D'Elia for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team message.

¶1. (C) Summary: In a meeting May 6 with the Ambassador, Senior Advisor and RRTOffs, KRG Minister of Finance Sarkis Aghajan (Sarkis) provided maps outlining the proposed zone, and said a decision must be made now to save Iraq's Christians. Since 2003, up to 40,000 Iraqi Christians have fled to Kurdish-controlled areas to find sanctuary and assistance. In addition to supporting Christian IDPs, Sarkis has financed the re-building of several Christian villages in the KRG, and believes an autonomous Christian zone will save Iraqi Christians from extinction. KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani is close to Sarkis, and voiced tentative support for a Christian autonomous zone. The future of Iraq's Christians may become part of political negotiations and potential future referendum to resolve northern boundary disputes. End Summary.

Special treatment for Christians in the KRG  
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¶2. (SBU) Several thousand members of religious minority groups have found sanctuary in the Kurdistan Region since 2003, including approximately 30,000 to 40,000 Christian Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), according to church authorities. Upon arrival, Christians received housing and a monthly stipend from the KRG; that stipend ended last year, as most families have managed to integrate into society. While RRTOff discussions with Christian IDPs suggest that they feel the KRG offers safe haven, they have voiced concern about the lack of employment opportunities, the loss of their livelihoods, and inadequate housing. Long-term Christian residents feel safe but also complain about unequal access to schools and discrimination in property disputes with Kurds.

KRG,s Christian Champion: Sarkis Aghajan  
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¶3. (C) KRG Minister of Finance and Economy, Sarkis Aghajan Mamandou (Sarkis), is the most influential KRG and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) official directly involved in protecting Christians. Sarkis is close to KRG Prime Minister Barzani; they fled to Iran in 1975 and went to school together. Sarkis had contemplated becoming a priest but instead joined the peshmerga there in 1979 at Massoud Barzani,s request. In August 2006, Sarkis was awarded the Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Gregory the Great, one of the highest and most widely recognized pontifical orders, by Pope Benedict XVI to honor his work with the Christian community in Iraq. Sarkis has remarked in meetings with RRTOffs that he receives his direction from the Holy Spirit, and has said that Nechirvan Barzani has been sent by Jesus Christ to save Iraq,s Christians. Sarkis set up committees,

in partnership with local churches, which allocated aid to Christian IDPs in Kurdish controlled areas. He has also used KRG funds to re-build 110 Christian villages, totaling approximately 10,000 houses, in Dohuk and Ninewa Provinces.

Autonomous zone will save Iraqi Christians &from extinction8

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¶4. (C) In a meeting May 6 with the Ambassador,s Senior Advisor and RRTOffs, Sarkis described the eradication of Iraqi Christians, has been going on for 2,000 years. He said Iraqi Christians are now in danger of extinction, with only 560,000 Christians remaining in Iraq, down from the estimated 1.2 ) 1.5 million before 2003. Sarkis said he is dedicated to doing all in his power to save the remaining Christians, and that the key is an autonomous zone. Such a zone could be within or outside of the KRG, Sarkis said, but if a referendum were to be held, the people would choose for the zone to be within the KRG. The region would have its own parliament, cabinet, budget, and national anthem, Sarkis explained, and would protect historical Christian lands. Although some Christians would naturally live outside of the area, they would still be affiliated with the region, and have the right to study in their language and establish their own curriculum at schools around Iraq. An autonomous region would give Christians hope for the future, and provide international legitimacy.

Sarkis, maps, and re-taking Christian villages

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¶5. (C) Sarkis rolled out several maps to detail his planned Christian autonomous zone. He provided Senior Advisor with

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maps highlighting three proposed zones, referring to the map with a smallest proposed Christian area as &the hopeless map.8 The most ambitious map outlines a ribbon of territory that starts at Karakesh, Ninewa Province, runs along the eastern edge of Mosul Lake, then folds east until reaching Deraluk, in Dohuk Province. Sarkis said that Kurds and other ethnic groups would also be included in the zone, but that of course all would be treated equally. He then added that he tells Arabs that this Christian enclave could also serve as a buffer zone to prevent further southward encroachment by Kurds.

¶6. (C) Sarkis claimed that PM Barzani said he would be willing to use force to move the remaining Kurds out of Christian ancestral lands, but that Sarkis had counseled against it. The key to success is peaceful resolution of the land disputes, Sarkis explained, so as to ensure goodwill between Kurds and Christians. He noted that before moving Kurds out of the villages, he first finds out whether original Christians would return, then he works out a settlement. He is not willing to get land back for people who are already living in Sweden, he said, and are just looking to sell, as that would encourage further Kurdish encroachment. He highlighted his success in a small triangle of land near the Syrian border, saying 5,000 Christians had re-settled there.

¶7. (C) Nechirvan also voiced his concerns for Iraqi Christians, telling Senior Advisor May 6 that a solution must be found to protect Christians, and that he had specifically raised protection for Christians with de Mistura. He noted that if Awakening Councils are becoming part of the Iraqi security forces, then why not Christians, who are also protecting their communities? Nechirvan said he personally supports Christians having an autonomous state, with their own assembly and police.

Sarkis: GOI will not protect Christians

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¶8. (C) During the March visit of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Sarkis told the

Commissioners that problems in Ninewa have been provoked by the Government of Iraq (GOI), as it continually tries to shift village demographics. Sarkis said that during Prime Minister Allawi's tenure, Allawi attempted to re-distribute 4,000 properties to Muslims living in Christian areas. He also said current Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki issued a similar order in 2007; however, both efforts were thwarted.

He also told the Commissioners that the Ninewa Plains are as sacred to Christians as Israel is to Jews, and warned that Christian villages will disappear within 20 years if the current situation continues. Sarkis also noted that although the Government of Iraq talks sweetly<sup>8</sup> about minority rights, he believes the GOI will stop pretending to protect Christians once Coalition Forces withdraw. He said that while the conflict between Shia and Sunna is a power struggle, attacks against Christians are religious persecution, motivated by extremists determined to exterminate Christians in Iraq.

Intra-Christian Rivalries: Assyrian Democratic Movement vs. Sarkis

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¶9. (C) Rival factions split the Iraqi Christian community, potentially adding an additional, complex layer to future political compromises on boundary decisions. The Assyrian Democratic Movement, a prominent Christian political party, is a thorn in Sarkis, side. In a meeting May 3 with Sarkis, RRT Deputy Team Leader (DTL) brought up an e-mail sent to him by Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) member and GOI ex-Minister Pascale Warda. (Note: Warda told DTL in a meeting April 23 that Sarkis was using aid to Christians to push KDP's agenda, increase KDP membership, and further Kurdish encroachment onto Christian lands. End Note.) In the e-mail Warda decried Sarkis and the KRG for failing to reconstruct Berfilka, an ancestral Christian village in Dohuk Province. Sarkis immediately went on the offensive, replying that every Christian village has been re-built by the KRG except Berfilka, and ADM's political maneuvering was to blame for Berfilka's situation. Sarkis then railed against Warda, ADM Secretary General Yonadem Kanna, and other ADM members for failing to support the Christian community, and sarcastically asked what DTL has done for Christians in Iraq. He accused her of not helping one Christian<sup>8</sup> during her tenure as Minister of Migration, despite several official KRG

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requests for assistance.

Comment

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¶10. (C) Calls for an autonomous Christian zone are likely to increase and could complicate the resolution of northern boundary disputes. Sarkis may push for a referendum to establish a Christian autonomous zone as a follow-on to decisions on new boundaries. Sarkis has political enemies in the Christian community and his aspirations for Christian autonomy seem quixotic. His ability to dole out patronage and his close relationship with Nechirvan Barzani, however, give his views real weight. End Comment.  
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